

HISTORY OF THE ARMY IN ALASKA

When the vast expanse of Alaska became a U.S. territory, the Army was there.

When the nation's leaders in Washington, D.C., decided to explore and map the Great Land, the Army was there.

When people poured into the territory in the quest for gold, the Army was there.

When Alaska became the 49th state, the Army was there.

Only the indigenous peoples of Alaska have been here longer. Today the Army thrives here, training in unforgiving arctic conditions, actively participating in community affairs, and providing assistance in natural disasters.

The U.S. Army's long and important history in the Great Land begins at the very moment Alaska became American soil, Oct. 18, 1867. Elements of the 9th Infantry were on hand as the Russian Golden Eagle was lowered and the Stars and Stripes were raised in Sitka, which became headquarters for the U.S. Military District, Alaska. The Army has had a presence, if very small at times, ever since.

Charged with maintaining law and order in the new territory, Soldiers helped quell uprisings and built new forts at Wrangell, St. Paul Canal, Kodiak Island and on the Kenai Peninsula. They also enforced regulations regarding the killing of fur seals, whose population had been severely depleted during the Russian reign. At Fort Wrangell and Sitka, Army wives worked with the Soldiers to establish schools and introduce Christianity to Alaska's Natives.

The Army relinquished control of Alaska to the Treasury Department in 1877, but did not entirely leave the territory. The Signal Corps operated weather stations, and a number of officers led small geographic explorations to learn more about the territory. These expeditions into various parts of Alaska continued through the turn of the century, as mapmaking and road and bridge building expanded the frontier.

The Klondike Gold Rush in Yukon Territory, Canada, and later gold rushes in Alaska helped that expansion, as thousands of people poured into the territory. Although the Royal Canadian Mounted Police maintained law and order in the Yukon during the Gold Rush, the United States government, after sending Capt. Patrick Henry Ray and 1st Lt. Wilds P. Richardson to study the situation, did not deem it necessary to send the Army into Alaska as peacekeepers.

As more and more people came into Alaska and northwestern Canada, the necessity for better communications with the Lower 48 states became critical. The Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System connected all the forts in the territory with Seattle. By 1903, the line stretched from Seattle to southeastern Alaska, Valdez, the Interior and Nome. The project fell under the direction of Brig. Gen. Adolphus W. Greely. Lt. William (Billy) Mitchell, another officer who would later achieve military fame, also worked on the four-year project.



Wrangell, circa 1905.



Totems in front of a Fort Wrangell house, circa 1899.



Above, a typical mining camp in Sitka.
Below, miners with gold nuggets.



While Greely and his men struggled to complete the WAMCATS project, Richardson, on his third tour of duty in Alaska, headed the Alaska Road Commission, building garrisons and trails throughout the enormous territory.

The Army in Alaska saw a decline in activity from 1908 to 1940, with a brief surge during World War I. Work continued on building roads and bridges and improving trails during this period.

As the world prepared for another great war in 1940, military construction in Alaska accelerated. In 1940, Ladd Field, near Fairbanks, was built as a cold-weather test station, and Fort Richardson, named for Wilds P. Richardson, was built in 1940-1941 near Anchorage. Col. Simon Bolivar Buckner assumed command of the Alaska Defense Force in 1940, and while at Fort Richardson achieved the ranks of brigadier and major general.

Through the Lend Lease

Program, the United States transferred nearly 8,000 aircraft to the Soviet Union at Ladd Field. The aircraft were flown from Great Falls, Mont., to Ladd Field by American crews. Then Russian crews flew the planes to Siberia and on to the Russian front.

The pilots leaving Great Falls followed a series of small airfields that became known as the Northwest Staging Route. The airfields were located at intervals along the one-lane supply road that became the Alaska Highway.

One of those airfields, Big Delta Airfield, later became Fort Greely, providing ample acreage for Northern Warfare Training Center exercises and testing by the Cold Regions Test Center.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Army engineers began building airstrips in the Aleutian Islands to fight possible Japanese invasions there. The Army Corps of Engineers joined Canadian Forces in building the

Alaska Highway in less than eight months. The 1,420-mile road was built as an overland supply route to get troops and supplies to Alaska. Officials in Washington, D.C. saw Alaska as a possible starting point for the Japanese forces to invade the United States and Canada, and took measures to prevent this.

In fact, Alaska was the only American soil other than Hawaii to see fighting during World War II, when the Japanese forces bombed Dutch Harbor and seized Attu and Kiska islands in the Aleutian Chain. The successful battle to retake Attu, in June 1943, was one of the bloodiest in the war. The Japanese pulled out of Kiska before the Americans stormed ashore a few months later.

At the end of the war, many of the small Army posts throughout the state closed permanently. Post-war emphasis turned to training.

The Alaskan Command (ALCOM) was created in January 1947, the first of the unified

Ladd Field

Seventh Infantry Division troops landing at Massacre Bay, Attu, May 1943.

Photo courtesy Elmendorf Air Force Base History Office.

This photo was taken shortly after an attack on Kiska Island. A Japanese ship burns and sinks in the harbor.

Bunkers built to defend against Japanese attack during World War II are still visible at Dutch Harbor in Unalaska.

Photo courtesy Alaska State Chamber of Commerce

commands under the Department of Defense. ALCOM was headquartered at Elmendorf Air Force Base, adjacent to Anchorage, and was in overall control of all military forces in Alaska.

The Alaskan Department changed its name again in 1947. The new name for the headquarters for all Army personnel in Alaska became U.S. Army, Alaska or USARAL. Military missions assigned to USARAL included ground and air defense of Alaska, with priority to the Anchorage and Fairbanks areas; development of cold-weather and mountain-warfare doctrines; conducting a cold-weather and mountain school at Fort Greely; providing logistical support to Air Force and Navy elements in Alaska; conducting National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve training; supervising ROTC activities; and providing for internal security, to include plans for recovery from nuclear attack.

By 1959, several Nike Hercules

missile battalions were activated in the Anchorage and Fairbanks areas. The last Nike Hercules battalion was inactivated in 1979.

July 1953 saw USARAL's combat units officially reorganized into the 172nd Infantry Brigade (Mechanized) at Fort Richardson and the 171st Infantry Brigade (Mechanized) at Fort Wainwright. The two brigades were redesignated as light-infantry brigades in 1969. USARAL was discontinued as a major subordinate command on December 31, 1974, and the 172nd Infantry Brigade (Alaska), headquartered at Fort Richardson, assumed command and control, reporting to Forces Command at Fort McPherson, Georgia. The 171st Infantry Brigade was inactivated in FY 1973.

The 6th Infantry Division (Light), headquartered at Fort Richardson, was activated in 1986, replacing the 172nd Infantry Brigade. Division headquarters moved to Fort

Wainwright in 1990. The 6th ID (L) was actively involved in training exercises in Japan and Thailand, at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Arkansas and Louisiana, and throughout Alaska until its inactivation in July 1994.

Once again the U.S. Army Alaska, this time familiarly known as USARAK, became an active headquarters at Fort Richardson. The major units under USARAK are the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, primarily located at Fort Wainwright and the Task Force 1-501 Airborne, located at Fort Richardson. United States Army Garrison Alaska is host to USARAK, the 172nd and various other tenant units and organizations. Elements of both the 172nd and the garrison can be found at both posts.

As explained in subsequent pages, Fort Greely continues to provide valuable training and testing land, but is now primarily a support facility for the Space and Missile Defense Command.



Site Summit, former Nike-Hercules missile facility, above Fort Richardson.

